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List 6

VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM

EXHIBITION OF PAPER CASTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE MOSAICS IN THE MOSQUE OF THE OMEYYADS AT DAMASCUS

lent by

Monsieur Eustache de Lorey

together with

Paper Casts of Early Christian and Byzantine mosaics belonging to the Victoria and Albert Museum

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14*th February to* 14*th March*, 1931.

THE MOSAIC DECORATIONS OF THE MOSQUE OF THE OMEYYADS AT DAMASCUS.

THE Arab historians and travellers of the Middle Ages often recorded their admiration of the mosaics, with which the Omeyyad caliph Walid I (705—715 A.D.) decorated the converted Byzantine church of St. John at Damascus. On the walls of the mosque were said to be depicted not only Medina and Mecca, but the towns of the whole world. Yet of all these mosaics only a few mutilated fragments seemed to have survived the centuries of fires and plunderings.

Not long after the most recent fire, in 1893, Mr. Dickie measured the mosque, and suggested that there might be further mosaic remains under the plaster (1), but it was not until after the war that M. Eustache de Lorey, the former Director of the Institut Français at Damascus made an examination by probing, and finally, in 1928, obtained permission from the Wakf Commission to remove part of the thick coat of plaster which covered the walls of the courtyard of the mosque. [Examples of this plaster are included in the Exhibition].

M. de Lorey has now successfully uncovered many of the spandrels of the arches of the colonnade; each of these seems to have been decorated with a single tree, or, on the wider fields over the oblong pilasters, with a fanciful representation of a town. Under the entrance portico a very large panel (over 100 feet long and 24 feet high) was discovered; upon this, enclosed by a rosette border, is depicted a series of towns, pavilions and imaginary buildings separated by a row of magnificent trees. The soffits of the arches and a few of the spandrels show coils of acanthus springing from conventionalised vases, not unlike work in the Dome of the Rock at Jerusalem (2).

These last, executed in 691 for Abdal Malik (the grandfather of Walid II who built the desert palace at Koseir'Amra) and those in the church of the Nativity at Bethlehem had previously been regarded as the best works of the period in mosaic. The mosaics of the Dome of the Rock have a high decorative quality and show great technical skill, but those now discovered at Damascus are pre-eminent for the excellence of their design, their variety of subject and their realistic treatment. They are the product of the most vivid imagination, and as for orthodox Mohammedans, the representation of men and of all forms of animal life was expressly forbidden, the trees, as M. de Lorey observes, are raised almost to the dignity of human portraits.

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(1) Palestine Exploration Fund. Journal. (1897). p. 273.

(2) O.M. Dalton. *Byzantine Art and Archæology*. (1911). p. 414.

36. P. 156

Many of the subjects can be paralleled in Byzantine mosaics; the towns are distantly related to those in the nave of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo at Ravenna, or to San Lorenzo fuori le Mura at Rome, (where the pearl hung in a doorway is to be noted); the sumptuous pavilions with their tent-like roofs, rising tier on tier and luxuriating in acanthus foliage, stand close to those in the church of St. George at Salonika (3). These pavilions may be ultimately derived from designs for the Alexandrine stage, which had previously influenced frescoes at Pompei and were later to influence the 10th century Armenian Etchmiadzin Gospel (4), which contains a miniature of a small round temple (tholos) with Corinthian columns closely resembling the two pavilions of the large panel in the portico at Damascus.

All this evidence combines to establish an 8th century date for these mosaics and prove that the restorations, which an inscription records to have been made in the 13th century in the Sultanate of Beybars, were of no great importance. The readiness with which this later work can be distinguished shows how far the art of the maker of mosaics had deteriorated since the Omeyyad period.

The mosaic tesserae are almost all of glass (average $\frac{1}{4}$ in. cube), but a few marble tesserae have been found and small plaques of pearl shell are also employed. The range of colours is extraordinary (about 40 in all) and no less than twelve shades of green have been counted. The surface of the wall was covered with a layer of mortar mixed with chopped straw, and a photograph shows that it was incised with a herringbone pattern to hold the second layer of finer mortar. In this the tesserae were set upon a design in red and black, and traces of these colours can sometimes be seen between them. Skilled workmen—their nationality has been discussed by Mlle. M. van Berchem (5)—would be needed to place the tesserae, since the device of tilting them to an angle of 30° was used, as at Parenzo and elsewhere, to break up the masses of gold.

The coloured reproductions were made from the originals by the students of the Ecole d'Art Arabe moderne (part of the Institut Français at Damascus) under the supervision of M. Lucien Cavro, formerly professor in the school.

M. Eustache de Lorey has published three articles dealing with the mosaics; in *Cahiers d'Art* (1929) p. 305; in *Monuments et Mémoires de la Fondation Eugène Piot* (1930) p. 111; and in *Parnassus* May, 1930.

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(3) O. M. Dalton. *Byzantine Art and Archæology*. p. 374.
(4) Illustrated in *Cahiers d'Art*. (1929). p. 306.
(5) *Monuments et Mémoires de la Fondation Eugène Piot*. (1930). p. 123.

PAPER CASTS OF MOSAICS

BELONGING TO THE

VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM.

ROME, SANTA COSTANZA. Early IVth Century.
The Vintage.
Geometrical design, with dolphins.
Busts, figures and rosettes in circles.
Figures and animals in guilloches.

ROME, SANTA MARIA MAGGIORE. IVth C. (Pope Liberius, 352–66)
Abrahain and the angels.

RAVENNA, SAN VITALE (consecrated, 547). VIth C.
The emperor Justinian and his court met by Bishop Maximianus
The empress Theodora and her attendants.

ROME, SANT' AGNESE FUORI LE MURA. VIIth C. (Honorius I, 625–38
St. Agnes.

ROME, SANTA MARIA IN COSMEDIN (from the demolished basilica
St. Peter). VIIIth C.
The Adoration of the Magi.

ROME, SANTA PRASSEDE. IXth C. (Pascal I, 817—24).
St. Peter introducing St. Praxed and a deacon.
The Virgin and St. John the Baptist.
St. Peter and St. Paul and the throne of God.
St. Praxed, St. Pudentiana, and St. Agnes.
St. John, St. Andrew, and St. James.

ROME, SANTA MARIA IN DOMNICA. IXth C. (Pascal I, 817—24).
Head of the Virgin (detail).

ROME, SAN CECILIA IN TRASTEVERE. IXth C.
Part of freize with medallions.

ROME, SAN CLEMENTE. Early XIIth C.
Isaiah.

ROME, SANTA MARIA IN TRASTEVERE. XIIth C.
St. Lawrence and Pope Calixtus I.

ROME, SAN TOMMASO IN FORMIS. XIIIth C.
Christ with two slaves (by Jacopo Cosmati).

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